

Eroticism and Epistemology in the *Apocryphal Acts of John*

ABSTRACT

The *Acts of John* contains two autobiographical speeches of the apostle in which he narrates his call as Jesus' disciple. The first account is found in the context of a gospel narrative (cc. 88-105), which concentrates on the apostle's exclusive experiences about his Master. Jesus appears in multiple forms, a phenomenon that has been labelled 'polymorphy' by previous scholarship. This article proposes that the epistemology of the text originates from Plato's *Symposium*, especially the famous Diotima-speech. The prayer of John (cc. 113-114) gives another version of his commission, and reflects ascetic views. It will be suggested that the epistemology of both passages is related to the emergence of Neo-Platonism and they were added to the *Acts of John* (originating from Asia Minor) in Alexandria at the end of the AD second century.

The *Acts of John* is one of the five so-called 'major apocryphal Acts' which are usually dated to the AD second or early third century.¹ The apocryphal Acts have been increasingly studied in the last decade, on account of their similarities to ancient novels, their varied theological perspectives, and the particular attention they pay to the role of women in the early Church. It is difficult to separate fact from fiction in those fascinating narratives, where acts of magic alternate with high-flying philosophical discourses, tumultuous trials and heroic martyrdom.

The *Acts of John* reports John's teachings and miracles in Asia Minor, including a longer gospel section about Jesus and the disciples, where we read about the mysterious ritual dance (instead of the last supper), and Jesus' speech from the cross of light. Unlike the hero in most other apocryphal Acts, John dies a peaceful death at the end of the narrative. We have only an incomplete text of the book, the beginning of which seems to be lost altogether, and the proper order of the extant passages is debatable. The episodes usually accompany the later and more widespread *Acts of John by Pseudo-Prochorus* in the manuscripts.² Opinions about the date and provenance of the

¹ The other four 'major Acts' are the Acts of Paul, Peter, Andrew, and Thomas, respectively. For their dating, see J.N. Bremmer, 'The Apocryphal Acts: Authors, Place, Time and Readership', in *idem* (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, Leuven 2001, 149-170.

² According to P.J. Lalleman, *The Acts of John: A Two-Stage Initiation into Johannine Gnosticism*, Leuven 1998, 6, 'the division of the episodes belonging to the AJ and those belonging to the *Acts of John by Prochorus* is beyond dispute'.

Acts of John differ widely. In his Groningen dissertation, Pieter Lalleman suggested an early date, the second quarter of the second century and Asia Minor as the time and place of composition.³ Earlier Junod and Kaestli proposed the second half of the second century in Egypt.⁴ A relatively late dating was offered by Knut Schäferdiek in Hennecke and Schneemelcher's reference work: the first half of the third century in East Syria. According to the last hypothesis, the *Acts of John* would be the latest of the major Acts.⁵ Recently Jan Bremmer basically confirmed Lalleman's opinion, proposing Asia Minor as the place of origin and c. 150 as the date of writing.⁶

At the end of this article I will return to the question of the date and provenance of the book. In the bulk of the study, however, I will direct attention to two sections of the *Acts of John* (chs. 88-89 and 113-114), where John's relation to Jesus is described in erotic terms. I suggest that Platonic tradition, early neo-Platonic epistemology in particular, formed the context in which the texts were composed and in which the language of those passages can be interpreted.

Jesus and John in Acts of John 88-93

For when he had chosen Peter and Andrew, who were brothers, he came to me and to my brother James, saying, 'I have need of you, come unto me'. And my brother said, 'John, this child on the shore who called to us, what does he want?' And I said, 'What child?' He replied, 'The one who is beckoning to us'. And I answered, 'Because of our long watch that we kept at sea you are not seeing straight, brother James: but do you not see the man who stands there, fair and comely and of a cheerful countenance?' But he said to me, 'Him I do not see, brother; but let us go and we shall see what it means'. So we steered the boat in silence,⁷ and we saw him helping us to beach the ship. And when we left the place, wishing to follow him again,⁸ he again appeared to me, bald-headed but with a thick and flowing beard; but to James he appeared as a youth whose beard

3 Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 244-270.

4 E. Junod & J.-D. Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 2 vols., Turnhout 1983, 1:692-695; *idem*, *L'Histoire des Actes Apocryphes des Apôtres du IIIe au IXe siècle: Le cas des Actes de Jean*, Genève and Lausanne 1982, 4. They regard chs. 94-102 and 109 as a later gnostic interpolation (*Acta Iohannis*, 2:627).

5 K. Schäferdiek, 'Johannesakten', in E. Hennecke & W. Schneemelcher, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung*, 2 vols., Tübingen 1964, 2:125-176 at 166f.

6 Bremmer, 'Apocryphal Acts', 153f and 158f.

7 M.R. James, *Apocrypha Anecdota: A Collection of Thirteen Apocryphical Books and Fragments*, Cambridge 1893, 4, lines 8-9, suggests εἰς γῆν for σῶγη, which is accepted by Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 1:193. Unless otherwise indicated, I rely on the text edited by Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, vol 1, and adapt the translation by J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, Oxford 1993, 310-338.

8 ὅτε σθα seems to be a confusion of ἔπομαι and ὀπάζω.

was just starting. We were perplexed, both of us, as to the meaning of what we had seen. (*Acts of John* 88-89)

The mysterious encounter of the brothers John and James quoted above is only the beginning of a series of bewildering confrontations with Jesus:

Yet to me there then appeared a still more wonderful thing; for I tried to see him as he was, and I never at any time saw his eyes closing but only open. And sometimes he appeared to me as a small man and an unattractive, and then again as one reaching to heaven. Also there was in him another marvel; when I sat at table he would take me upon his breast and I held him; and sometimes his breast felt to me to be smooth and tender, and sometimes hard, like stone, so that I was perplexed in myself and said: 'What does this mean?'

Later the synoptic transfiguration scene is briefly reported. At another time Jesus takes his closest disciples with him to the mountain (90): 'Now I,' John recalls, 'because he loved me, went to him quietly as though he should not see, and stood looking upon his back.' John sees Jesus naked and radiating, his head reaching to heaven. When John cries from fear, Jesus turns around and becomes a small man. On another occasion, Jesus and the disciples sleep at a house at (the lake of?) Gennesaret. John, after wrapping himself in his cloak, watches Jesus secretly. John pretends that he is asleep, and hears Jesus talking to another man like Jesus himself.

According to the *Acts of John*, Jesus is capable of rapidly changing his appearance. He can even appear in different forms to different people at the same time. This phenomenon, called the 'polymorphy' of Christ, has provoked much discussion among scholars.⁹ Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to regard these chapters as a chain of purely symbolic statements about Christ's polymorphy, and overlook the unfolding narrative plot.

9 E. Junod, 'Polymorphie du Dieu Sauveur', in J. Ries (ed.), *Gnosticisme et Monde Hellénistique*, Louvain-la-Neuve 1982, 38-46; Junod & Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 2:466-493; P.G. Schneider, *The Mystery of the Acts of John: An Interpretation of the Hymn and the Dance in Light of the Acts' Theology*, San Francisco 1991, 57-66, 98-113; P.J. Lalleman, 'Polymorphy of Christ', in J.N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of John*, Kampen 1995, 97-118; H. Garcia, 'La polymorphie du Christ: Remarques sur quelques définitions et sur de multiples enjeux', *Apocrypha* 10 (1999), 16-55.

The structure of chapters 87-105 is that of a gospel narrative.¹⁰ It begins with a prologue and the call of the disciples at the sea. It also includes Jesus' transfiguration (in two versions), a visit in the house of a Pharisee,¹¹ and the multiplication of bread.¹² There are episodes that do not readily evoke any of the canonical gospel narratives: John watches Jesus on several occasions, Jesus never blinks his eyes, leaves no footprints on the ground, and once pulls John's beard. A ritual dance replaces the last supper, and a peculiar crucifixion scene immediately followed by the ascension, closes the section. The gospel evidently talks about a gradually unfolding self-revelation of Jesus, beginning with the child whom James saw on the shore and concluding with the cosmic vision of the cross of light.

John witnesses more of this unfolding revelation than the rest of the disciples. After the brothers' perplexing parallel visions, John continues (89): 'Yet to me there appeared a still more wonderful (παραδοξότερον) sight.' After the transfiguration scene, John alone approaches Jesus. At (the lake of?) Gennesaret, John alone (ἐγὼ μόνος) watches Jesus secretly. The theme of the beloved disciple particularly emphasises the intimacy between Jesus and John. On the mount, John approaches Jesus 'because he [Jesus] loved him' (90). This is the only reference in the *Acts of John* that John was the 'beloved disciple', and it is explicitly connected with John's exclusive experiences about Jesus.¹³ The motif of the beloved disciple first occurs in the *Gospel of John* in the narration of the last supper: 'One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was leaning on his bosom'.¹⁴ The *Acts of John* detaches this episode from the last supper, and presents it as a habitual manner of Jesus and John's reclining at the table: 'When I sat at table he would take me upon his breast and I held

10 Although scholars remarked that this section contains gospel material, there is no discussion, to my knowledge, of the passage as a gospel. Cf. Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 42-6; Junod & Kaestli, *Acta Johannis*, 2:595-600; Beyschlag, *Die verborgene Überlieferung*, 97-116. For the relation of this gospel with the *Gospel of Peter*, see I. Czachesz, 'The Gospel of Peter and the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles' in T. Nicklas & Th.J. Kraus (eds.), *Das Petrusevangelium als Teil antiker Literatur*, Berlin 2006, 241-257, forthcoming. The parallels with the *Gospel of the Saviour* (Papyrus Berolensis 22220), edited by Ch.W. Hedrick & P.A. Mirecki, *Gospel of the Savior: A New Ancient Gospel*, Santa Rosa, CA 1999, for example 108.54-64, have not yet been studied, to my knowledge.

11 Cf. *Luke* 7.36-50; 11.37-54.

12 *Mark* 6.35-44. This is the only miracle that we find in all the four canonical Gospels. The *Acts of John* inserts it into the frame of the dinner at the Pharisee's house.

13 In the *Gospel of John*, all five occurrences of the expression are in the second half of the book (from chapter 13 on). This indicates that also the canonical Johannine gospel tradition associates the phrase with the revelation of Jesus before his disciples.

14 *John* 13.23, ἦν ἀνακειμένος εἰς ἐκ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, ὃν ἠγάπα ὁ Ἰησοῦς. *John* 21.20 as well connects the two motifs: 'the disciple whom Jesus loved (...), who also leaned on his breast at the supper'.

him, and sometimes his breast felt to me to be smooth and tender, and sometimes hard, like stone' (89). The motif of physical touch occurs once more: 'Sometimes when I meant to touch him, I met a material (ὕλωδης, lit. 'woody') and solid (πάχους, lit. 'thick') body; and at other times, when I felt him, the substance was immaterial and bodiless and as if it were not existing at all.' In the *Acts of John*, physical touch and closeness is a corollary of the intimate spiritual relation between master and disciple.

Intimacy in the Symposium

How did the subject of fondness and intimacy between master and disciple become such a central motif in the gospel of the *Acts of John*? Was it due to an interest in anecdotal details, or did it have an underlying theoretical reason? The theme of intimacy between master and disciple has precedents in classical literature. In Plato's *Symposium*, when Socrates arrives for the dinner, Agathon expresses his wish that Socrates would recline next to him.¹⁵ Socrates complies with his wish, reclines next to him and answers: 'My dear Agathon, I only wish that wisdom were the kind of thing one could share by sitting next to someone – if it flowed, for instance, from the one that was full to the one that was empty, like the water in two cups finding its level through a piece of worsted' (175d4-7).

The company, as we know, decides to spend the night with each of them delivering an encomium about Eros. In his speech, Socrates reports what the wise Diotima had taught him about Love.¹⁶ The speech consists of two parts, the first one describing the nature of Eros, the second describing its effect on people.¹⁷ Eros, Diotima said, is 'a very powerful spirit (δαίμων μέγας), and spirits (πᾶν τὸ δαιμόνιον) are half way between god and man' (202d14-e1). 'They [spirits] are the envoys and interpreters of men's things to gods, and of gods' things to men' (202e3-4). Born of Resource (Πόρος) and Need (Πενία), Eros is barefoot and homeless, but also a schemer (ἐπιβουλος) after the beautiful and good (203b-d). The gods and the wise do not seek wisdom, because wisdom is already theirs. Neither do the ignorant, because they are satisfied with what they are. Eros is between them, a philosopher, because

15 Trans. M. Joyce in E. Hamilton & H. Cairns (eds.), *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters*, Princeton 1963, adapted. I follow K. Dover, *Plato: Symposium*, Cambridge and London 1980, at many points.

16 Plato, *Symposium* 201d-212b.

17 Plato, *Symposium* 201d-212b. The nature (*das Wesen*) of Eros: 201e8-204c6; the effect (*das Wirken*) of Eros: 204c7-212c3. Cf. K. Sier, *Die Rede der Diotima: Untersuchungen zum platonischen Symposium*, Stuttgart and Leipzig 1997; Ch.A.M. Hupperts, *Eros dikaios*, s.l. 2000, 2:170-171.

Eros is the love of what is beautiful (ἔρως περι τὸ καλόν), and wisdom is one of the most beautiful things (204a-b).¹⁸

Speaking of the effect of Eros, Diotima differentiates two groups of people. Most people are ‘fertile in body’ (ἐγκύμονες κατὰ τὰ σώματα). They turn to women and raise a family, in the hope that they will secure immortality, a memory of themselves, and happiness (208e2-6). Those, in contrast, who are ‘fertile in soul’ (οἱ δὲ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν), conceive and bear the things of the spirit: ‘Wisdom and all her sister virtues’. They look for beautiful souls, educate them, and procreate more beautiful and immortal children.¹⁹

Then Diotima comes to ‘the final revelation’ (τὰ τέλεα καὶ ἐποπτικά, 210a1). She differentiates between a lower and a higher form of knowledge, and claims that not everyone is capable of acquiring the latter.²⁰ ‘The candidate for this initiation cannot, if his efforts are to be rewarded, begin too early to devote himself to the beauties of the body. First of all, if his preceptor instructs him as he should, he will fall in love with the beauty of one individual body, so that his passion may give life to noble discourse’.²¹ Then one becomes the lover of the beauty manifested in all beautiful bodies; thereafter of the beauty of laws and institutions. ‘And next, his attention should be diverted from institutions to the sciences, so that he may know the beauty of every kind of knowledge [...] until he will come upon one single form of knowledge, the knowledge of the beauty I am about to speak of.’ (210c7-d9) Diotima then describes the highest phase (210e1-6):

Whoever has been initiated so far in the mysteries of Love (τὰ ἐρωτικά) and has viewed all these aspects of the beautiful in due succession, is at last drawing near the final revelation. And now, Socrates, there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for.

18 Eros is thus intermediate between (1) wise and ignorant, (2) beautiful and ugly, (3) mortal and immortal; cf. L.C.H. Chen, *Acquiring Knowledge of the Ideas: A Study of Plato's Methods on the Phaedo, the Symposium and the Central Books of the Republic*, Stuttgart 1992, 38. These are three types of striving, and therefore, three possibilities of ascent, attested also in the *Phaedo*; *ibidem*, note 4.

19 Plato, *Symposium* 208e-209e. ‘Who would not prefer such fatherhood to merely human propagation, if he stopped to think of Homer, and Hesiod, and all the greatest of our poets? Who would not envy them their immortal progeny, their claim upon the admiration of posterity?’ (209d1-5). Cf. *Gospel of Philip* 58.17-59.6.

20 Diotima uses the language of the Eleusinian mysteries, differentiating between the ‘Lesser Mysteries’ at Agrae, and the ‘Greater’ ones at Eleusis; cf. C.J. Rowe, *Plato: Symposium*, Warminster 1998, 193-194 and Hupperts, *Eros dikaios*, 2:201-202.

21 Diotima speaks about three persons. (1) The initiate is called ‘lover’ (ἐραστής), a name used for the philosophers also in *Phaedo* 66e2. (2) The object of his love is a ‘beautiful body’, in whom he procreates ‘beautiful words’. (3) The third figure is ‘the leader’, who can be identified as the μυσταγωγός of the mysteries. This is the role of Diotima beside Socrates. The initiate, however, may accomplish his journey also without a leader (210b9-c1). Cf. Hupperts, *Eros dikaios*, 2:203.

Diotima gives a description of the beauty that the lover-initiate-philosopher contemplates (210e6-211b5), and finally she recapitulates the whole journey (211b6-d1):²²

And so, when his correct boy-loving (*παιδεραστειν*) has carried our candidate so far that he begins to catch sight of that beauty, he is almost within reach of the final revelation. And this is the way, the only way, he must approach, or be led toward the matters of love (*τὰ ἐρωτικὰ*). Starting from individual beauties, the quest for the universal beauty must find him ever moving upwards, stepping from rung to rung – that is, from one to two, and from two to *every* lovely body, from bodily beauty to the beauty of institutions, from institutions to learning, and from learning in general to the special lore that pertains to nothing but the beautiful itself – until at last he comes to know what beauty is.

When Socrates has finished his speech, Alcibiades arrives and reclines between Agathon and Socrates. A handsome young man, he relates that once he invited Socrates to his home and offered to sleep with him (218b-219d). ‘If there is one thing I am keen on it is to make the best of myself, and I think you are more likely to help me there than anybody else.’ (218d1-3) Socrates answered (218d7-219b2) that Alcibiades had to find him ‘so extraordinarily beautiful’ that Alcibiades’ ‘own attractions (*εὐμορφία*) must be quite eclipsed’. Alcibiades was trying, Socrates suggested, ‘to exchange the semblance of beauty for the thing itself’. ‘We must think it over one of these days’, Socrates concluded, ‘and do whatever seems best for the two of us.’ Alcibiades thought that Socrates gave in, lay beside him, but to his disappointment, nothing happened between them. Alcibiades, who ‘seemed to be still in love with him’ (222c2-3), now goes on praising Socrates. Finally they agree that Agathon will change his place and lie between Alcibiades and Socrates. Agathon rises up to do so, but then a revelling band enters and spoils the order of the banquet.

The Acts of John and the Symposium

If we determine Socrates’ role in the *Symposium* according to the Diotima speech, we have to conclude that Socrates is the lover-philosopher. The philosopher proceeds toward the vision of the beauty, and ‘procreates beautiful words’ while conversing with his students (209c2-7, 210a7-8). The student is not immediately destined to see the ultimate beauty, but one has to assume that he will become himself a ‘lover’ one day. If we apply this blueprint to

²² Beside its rhetorical function, this recapitulation gives emphasis to the correct order of the steps of cognition (*Erkenntnisschritte*; Sier, *Rede der Diotima*, 160).

the *Acts of John*, the role of the ‘lover’ is taken by Jesus. ‘But to you I am speaking’, Jesus says, ‘and listen to what I speak. I put into your mind to come up to this mountain so that you may hear what a disciple should learn from his teacher and a man from God.’ (97) In accordance with the Diotima speech, Jesus has need of teaching John: ‘John, there must be one man to hear these things from me; for I need one who is ready to hear.’ (98) However, we come to a dead end if we further analyse the roles. In the *Acts of John*, Jesus reveals himself to his disciples. Jesus himself is the beauty whom John longs to behold. In turn, it is impossible to claim that Jesus is heading toward the vision of the absolute beauty – as the philosopher does in the Diotima speech.

This contradiction will be solved if we look at the narrative parts of the *Symposium*, where the roles are cast quite differently from the Diotima speech. Socrates is characterized as ‘superhuman’,²³ depicted by his students in the same words that he used to describe the absolute beauty.²⁴ Consequently, it is always his pupils who admire his beauty, and want to dine beside him or sleep with him. They either hope to share in his wisdom (Agathon) or Socrates teaches them to do so (Alcibiades). The roles of the lover and the beloved are reversed.²⁵

This description of the roles can be applied to the relation of Jesus and John. In the *Acts of John* it is Jesus who appears as beautiful, as the one whose company John eagerly seeks. Both texts use images of fondness, intimacy, and celebration to approach the parallel theme of spiritual perfection. Socrates teaches the whole company at the banquet how to ascend to the realm of the absolute beauty. Jesus, after manifesting himself in different ways to his disciples, not least during common meals, finally lets them participate in the ritual dance.²⁶ Socrates is willing to share his spiritual beauty with Alcibiades to help him to achieve excellence. Jesus reveals his polymorphic body to John, and finally shows him the cosmic vision of the cross of light so that he might hear ‘what a disciple has to learn from the master, and a human from God’.²⁷

23 In his encomium, Alcibiades praises Socrates as ‘truly superhuman’ (δαμνότιος ὡς ἀληθῶς, 219c1). According to Hupperts, *Eros dikaios*, 262, ‘Socrates is an example of an erastes-philosopher who is on the second level.’

24 *Symposium* 211d1-2 and 221c4-d6. Cf. R.G. Edmonds, ‘Socrates the Beautiful: Role Reversal and Midwifery in Plato’s *Symposium*’, *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 130 (2000), 261-285, esp. 274, note 31.

25 Cf. Edmonds, ‘Socrates the Beautiful’, passim.

26 In chapter 101, he says to John that he wants the dance to be called a mystery.

27 *Acts of John* 97.

Finally, an idea of twofold initiation is present in the *Acts of John*, as well as in the *Symposium*. In the *Symposium*, it emerges as a distinction between the ‘Lesser’ and ‘Greater Mysteries’, only the latter leading to the vision of the beauty. In the *Acts of John* the first level includes miracles and ethical teaching, and the second level contains the final revelation as described above.²⁸

Inevitably, there are some differences between the symbols of the two books. The *Symposium* uses a plainly erotic vocabulary (ἔρωσ, παιδεραστέω), while the *Acts of John* designates the relation of John and Jesus with more general terms of ‘fondness’ (ἀγαπάω, φιλέω).²⁹ In the night, Alcibiades lies beside Socrates and puts his cloak around him, whereas John only watches Jesus from a distance, after wrapping himself in his cloak. Sensual overtones, however, are not missing from the *Acts of John* either. The intimacy of Jesus and John during meals is even more direct than that of Socrates and Agathon at the banquet. The handsome young man on the shore whom John sees is physically attractive (εὖμορφος), depicted precisely as Alcibiades (ἡ παρὰ σοὶ εὖμορφία).

Spotless love: Acts of John 113

Love also appears as a guide to the vision of beauty in the autobiographical flashback of John’s prayer in his farewell speech (chs. 113-114). Jesus does not permit John to marry, and repeatedly expresses his claim on him: ‘I am in need of you’ and ‘you are mine’. John’s disobedience leads to his blindness, when he finally ‘submits’ to Jesus. Subsequently, Jesus establishes in John a ‘spotless love’ and a ‘safe way’ toward him. He sets it in his soul to have no other possession than Jesus. John’s blindness is also the starting point of the building up of a new vision in him. First, Jesus opens John’s spiritual eyes and makes the sight of women hateful for his visible eyes. Then he guides John from the sight of transient things to the sight of the eternal. Finally, John reaches the end in Jesus.

This progress resembles love’s way to absolute beauty as described in the *Symposium*. The more elementary stage of encratism is followed by the superior stage of the contemplation of the unspeakable beauty. Whereas the initiate lover-philosopher of the Diotima speech gained immortality, John at the cli-

28 Cf. Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 52-53. Lalleman connects the addition of the second level to the final redaction of the text.

29 Eventually these verbs can also mean sexual love. Cf. *Acts of John* 113, ‘you established my spotless love toward you’ or ‘you rendered my love toward you spotless’. The text emphasises that this is a merely spiritual φιλέα, in the same way as Socrates talks about Eros as a spiritual guide.

max of his ascent receives salvation. John's farewell speech rehearses the message of the gospel section in a theoretical discourse, describing a similar way of perfection as the *Symposium*. However, whereas sensual contact with Jesus played an important role in the previously discussed section (*Acts of John* 88ff), this idea is eliminated from the second passage (*Acts of John* 113). Here John's way to perfection is made possible by his receiving 'spiritual eyes', not mentioned in the previous story. Although the two versions can be reconciled – especially if we regard the *Symposium* as a common blueprint – the shift of emphasis from physical intimacy to ascetic contemplation remains explicit.

The Platonism of the Acts of John

If the speeches of the *Acts of John* were influenced by Plato's *Symposium*, it certainly did not occur in a historical and cultural vacuum. The developments of Platonic thought at the end of the AD second century help us to understand the ways our text utilizes the Platonic heritage.

Several of the second-century fathers were familiar with Plato's ideas. Justin Martyr was in the beginning 'quite enraptured with the perception of immaterial things, and the contemplation of ideas added wings to [his] intelligence'³⁰. 'Within a short time,' Justin writes around AD 160, 'I was hoping to have forthwith a clear vision of God. For this is the aim of Plato's philosophy.' After his conversion to Christianity, Justin continued to see a relative value in Platonism.³¹

However, the Platonic tradition was most consistently integrated with Christian thought in Alexandria. The idea of the soul's return to her origin is a common Alexandrian heritage.³² Basilides (fl. c. 120–142) asserted the omnipresent impulse of all things to return to their origin.³³ Valentinus (fl. c. 135–160), Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215), and Origen (c. 185–254) were equally indebted to Plato,³⁴ and also represented the idea of the ascension of the soul in some form or another.³⁵

30 *Dialogue with Trypho* 2.2-7, trans. A.L. Williams.

31 Cf. 2 *Apology* 13.

32 Cf. Th.G. Sinnige, *Six Lectures on Plotinus and Gnosticism*, Dordrecht and Boston 1999, chapter III.

33 Sinnige, *Six Lectures*, 29-35; P.A. Mirecki, 'Basilides', in D.N. Freedman et al. (eds.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD)* 1, New York 1992, 624-625.

34 J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, London 1977, 384-389; *idem*, 'Platonism', in *ABD* 5.

35 Sinnige, *Six Lectures*, 35-47.

The ascension of the soul to absolute beauty becomes a central topic in the philosophy of Plotinus (c. 205–270).³⁶ Whereas the writings of the aforementioned Alexandrians contain only general parallels of thought with the relevant sections of the *Acts of John*, Plotinus' *Enneads* contain actual arguments and wordings that come very close to John's speeches. Plotinus compares 'heavenly love' with the loves we experience 'here below'. Earthly loves are 'loves only of images', which have to be put away to attain true life.³⁷ This program corresponds to John's claim that Jesus made earthly love hateful to him, and replaced it with 'spotless love' toward him (113). Plotinus has a wholesale theory of spiritual eyes.³⁸ 'Let him who can, follow and come within, and leave outside the sight of his eyes and not turn back to the bodily splendours which he saw before. When he sees the beauty in bodies he must not run after them.' (1.6.8) 'And what does this inner sight see?' (1.6.9) For improving the inner sight, Plotinus describes a similar sequence of contemplation as the Diotima speech: 'beautiful way of life', 'beautiful works', 'the souls of people who produce the beautiful works'.³⁹ 'This alone is the eye', Plotinus concludes, 'that sees the great beauty. But anyone who comes to the sight blear-eyed with wickedness, and unpurified, or weak and by his cowardice unable to look what is very bright, he sees nothing, even if someone shows him what is there and possible to see.' (1.6.9) These passages can be readily compared with John's prayer in chapter 113.

Another peculiarity in John's speeches that has its parallels in Alexandrian tradition is his emphasis on 'secrecy'. Whereas religious secrets of various kinds were found in Greco-Roman antiquity,⁴⁰ John's notion of secrecy can be identified with so-called apophatism. This is especially suggested by the term ἄρρητος (unspeakable) in chapter 90.⁴¹ Apophatism claims that human language is incapable of talking about God: mystical experience is the only way

36 Cf. D.J. O'Meara, *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads*, Oxford 1993, 100-110; M.R. Miles, *Plotinus on Body and Beauty*, Oxford 1999, 130-161. For the idea as part of a common Alexandrian heritage, see Sinnige, *Six Lectures*, 26-47.

37 Miles, *Plotinus*, 144.

38 Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6, trans. A.H. Armstrong in the Loeb Classical Library.

39 Cf. Plato, *Symposium* 210.

40 Religious secrecy was often related to something that had to be concealed, as in the examples of J.N. Bremmer, 'Religious Secrets and Secrecy in Classical Greece', in H.G. Kippenberg & G.G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, Leiden and New York 1995, 61-78. The same applies to the 'messianic secret' of the gospel tradition, although there the disciple's lack of understanding is also important (E. Schweizer, *A Theological Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. O.C. Dean, Jr., Nashville 1991, 125f; recently G. Theißen, 'Die pragmatische Bedeutung der Geheimismotive im Markusevangelium: Ein wissenssoziologischer Versuch', in Kippenberg & Stroumsa, *Secrecy*, 225-245.) Cf. 2 *Corinthians* 14:2, *Gospel of Thomas* 13.

41 Line 16 in Junod & Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 1:199.

to know him. In various forms, it is represented in Plato's *Parmenides* 142a, in Middle Platonism (1st century BC – AD 3rd century), in the thought of Philo of Alexandria (c. 25 BC–AD 50), Justin Martyr (died in 165), and Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215), as well as in Gnostic texts and the Corpus Hermeticum (AD 2nd–5th century).⁴² As an elaborate system, apophatism appears with Plotinus,⁴³ and (Pseudo-)Dionysius the Areopagite.⁴⁴ In a characteristic passage, Plotinus claims: 'Strictly speaking, we ought not to apply any terms at all to It.' (6.9.3)

In the *Acts of John*, as in later Neo-Platonic systems, apophatism logically implies the theory of the ascent of the soul. Since human language cannot encapsulate the essence of God, the soul has to be purified and transformed in order to be able to experience God in a mystical union. Whereas chapters 88-102 describe various forms of mystical experience, chapter 113 emphasizes the necessity of gradual purification.

Finally, Plotinus uses the metaphor of dance in a passage that resembles the famous dance of Jesus and the disciples in the *Acts of John*. In the *Acts of John* 94-96, the ritual dance takes the place of the last supper in the narrative. 'So he commanded us to make a circle, holding one another's hands, and he himself stood in the middle. He said, "Respond Amen to me." ' The disciples dance and reply to him. Toward the end of the dance, Jesus says, 'Now if you respond to my dancing, see yourself in me who speak; and when you have seen what I do, keep silence about my mysteries.' Plotinus writes about the One:⁴⁵

We are always around it but do not always look to it; it is like a choral dance: in the order of its singing the choir keeps round the conductor but may sometimes turn away, so that he is out of their sight, but when it turns back to him it sings beautifully and is truly with him; so we too are always around him (...) but not always turned to him; but when we do look to him, then we are at our goal and at

42 D.B. Farrow, 'Apophatische Theologie', in H.D. Betz et al. (eds.), *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 1, Tübingen 1998, 633-634, at 633; P. Widdicombe, 'Justin Martyr's Apophaticism', *Studia Patristica* 36 (2001), 313-319; cf. R. Mortley, *From Word to Silence: Vol 2, The Way of Negation, Christian and Greek*, Bonn 1986.

43 M. Sells, 'Apophasis in Plotinus: A Critical Approach', *Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985), 47-65; Mortley, *From Word to Silence* 44-62.

44 AD fifth or sixth century. However, the Neo-Platonic form of the idea was used already by Christian thinkers much earlier. Synesius of Cyrene (370–c. 414) was a student of Hypatia (370–415) in Alexandria at the end of the 4th century, and later wrote hymns in which he used apophasis to talk about God, cf. S. Vollenweider, *Neoplatonische und christliche Theologie bei Synesios von Kyrene*, Göttingen 1985, 13-27; H. Seng, 'Reden vom Unsagbaren: Die Hymnen des Synesios von Kyrene', in P. Bühler & T. Fabiny (eds.), *Interpretation of Texts Sacred and Secular*, Zürich 1999, 237-253.

45 Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.9.8.

rest and do not sing out of tune as we truly dance our god-inspired dance around him.

The Acts of John and Alexandria

Let us conclude by some suggestions regarding the composition of the *Acts of John*. We found that chapters 88-102 and 113 rely on the Platonic idea of ascension to the beauty, especially as described in the *Symposium*. The passages suggest a common Platonic influence and were probably composed in the same area at the same time.⁴⁶ Our investigations point towards Alexandria, the place of origin suggested also by Junod and Kaestli. Unlike Junod and Kaestli, however, we argued for the compositional unity (and a common origin) of the whole gospel section.⁴⁷ Alexandria was the city of Philo and Clement, and it was there at the beginning of the third century that Ammonius Saccas (died c. 242) initiated Neo-Platonism.⁴⁸ Ammonius Saccas, who did not leave any writings behind, was the teacher of Plotinus as well as of Origen.⁴⁹

Eusebius in his *Church History* provides us with some detail about the intellectual life of Alexandrian Christians at the beginning of the third century.⁵⁰ He mentions not only that Origen studied with Ammonius Saccas (6.19.6),⁵¹ but also that he gave catechesis (in addition to his work as *grammaticus*), and these lectures were attended also by non-Christians, many of whom converted and became martyrs (6.3 and 18).⁵² Eusebius (6.19.12-14) quotes a letter by Origen, where Origen himself reports that he had listeners who were versed in Greek philosophy.⁵³ In that milieu, it is not difficult to situate the author of *Acts of John* 88-89 and 113, who could have visited the schools of Origen and Ammonius Saccas at the same time.

46 Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 46, claims that the gospel section (belonging to his section B) is 'more esoteric' than the Asian narrative (his section A) to which chapter 113 belongs. If we consider the similarities of the two commission stories (belonging to Lalleman's section A and B, respectively) this it is not necessarily the case.

47 Cf. note 4 above.

48 Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 380-383.

49 Eusebius, *Church History* 6.19.6-8. Cf. R. Williams, 'Origenes', in G. Müller et al. (eds.), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 25, Berlin and New York 1995, 397-420, at 398.

50 We also have an important source regarding the end of the second century: Clement of Alexandria, *Instructor* 2-3, provides us with substantial information about the everyday life of the rich Christians of Alexandria; cf. P.J.G. Gussen, *Het leven in Alexandrië volgens de cultuurhistorische gegevens in de Paedagogus (boek II & III) van Clemens Alexandrinus*, Assen 1955, 90-122; A. Jakab, *Ecclesia alexandrina: Evolution sociale et institutionnelle du christianisme alexandrin (Ile et IIIe siècles)*, Bern and Berlin 2001, 257-292.

51 Cf. p. 72 above.

52 Cf. Jakab, *Ecclesia alexandrina*, 157-158; 162-169.

53 Origenes' asceticism (philosopher's life, φιλοσοφείν) provoked much admiration (6.8), not to talk about his self-castration.

Alexandrian theologians were familiar with our passages from the *Acts of John*. Clement of Alexandria quotes the gospel section around 200: ‘It is accordingly related in traditions, that John, touching the outward body itself, sent his hand deep down into it, and that the solidity of the flesh offered no obstacle, but gave way to the hand of the disciple.’⁵⁴ This motif is not attested anywhere else than in Clement and the *Acts of John*, and it is closely related to the epistemological concepts discussed above. Somewhat later, Origen reflects on the idea of Christ’s polymorphy.⁵⁵

If we put these clues together, we come to the conclusion that the *Acts of John* was revised in Alexandria at the beginning of the third century by educated Christians who were influenced by Neo-Platonism just emerging in that city. Clement probably knew the tradition about Jesus’ body before it became part of the *Acts of John*; Origen could have already known the text itself.⁵⁶ In sum, we suggest that an earlier form of the *Acts of John*, consisting of the Asian narrative episodes⁵⁷ arrived at Alexandria in the last quarter of the 2nd century, where the two larger speeches of John were added to it.⁵⁸

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54 Clement of Alexandria, *Comments on the First Epistle of John* 1.1: *Fertur ergo in traditionibus, quoniam Iohannes ipsum corpus quod erat extrinsecus tangens, manum suam in profunda misisse et ei duritiam carnis nullo modo reluctatam esse, sed locum manui praeuisse discipuli*. Text in O. Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, vol. 3, Leipzig 1909, 210, lines 12-15; trans. W. Wilson in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (American edition) 2:574. For the evaluation of the passage, see Junod & Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, vol 2:486-487 and Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 268.

55 Lalleman, ‘Polymorphy’, 98 and 102 proposes that Origen took the idea from Philo. Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, vol 2, 692-3, also suggest contacts between the *Acts of John* and Origen.

56 Eusebius, *Church History* 3.1, quotes ‘tradition’ (παράδοσις) from Origen on the apostles, including a reference to John’s Ephesian mission and martyrdom. E. Junod, ‘Origène, Eusèbe et la tradition sur la répartition des champs de mission des apôtres (Eusèbe, Histoire ecclésiastique, III, 1, 1-3)’, in F. Bovon *et al.*, *Les Actes apocryphes des apôtres: Christianisme et monde païen*, Genève 1981, 233-248 at 242, concludes that Eusebius could actually take the passage from Origen (*pace* A. Harnack); D.R. MacDonald, *The Acts of Andrew and the Acts of Andrew and Matthias in the City of the Cannibals*, Atlanta 1990, 56-59, argues that Origen’s information comes from the Apocryphal Acts. However, the idea that Origen knew several of the major Acts, does not especially confirm the Alexandrian links to the *Acts of John*.

57 Bremmer, ‘Apocryphal Acts’, 156-157, argues that the social terminology of the Asian narratives locates them to Aphrodisias and Northern Lycia.

58 This hypothesis will have to be checked in the future against the whole of the *Acts of John*, with special attention to the source-critical problems of the book.